Arbitrary innovations and literary universals

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The possibility of literary universals comes from the possibility that the forms and other aspects of literary texts are shaped by external factors such as psychology and the sociocultural functions of literature. Psychological factors include limitations on memory and processing, along with psycholinguistic factors (which might allow linguistic universals to have an influence on literary universals).

However, any text can have forms imposed on it which are not determined by psychological or general sociocultural factors (Fabb). Consider for example the new assigned forms of Oulipo literature (Mathews and Brotchie), including for example the writing of lipogrammatic texts in which a letter of the alphabet is excluded throughout, such as George Perec's *La Disparition* which never uses the letter 'e'. As an example of a more common type of imposed form consider the Hiberno-Latin poem 'Altus prosator' in which every stanza begins on a new letter of the Latin alphabet. The alphabet is not itself related to a literary universal, but is an independent system. Would we expect the imposition of these arbitrary forms to have any relation to literary universals? The question is difficult. A relevant consideration is whether the forms are widespread. For example, are poems which follow the forward sequence of the alphabet significantly more common than poems which follow the equally arbitrary backwards sequence of the alphabet (e.g., starting with Z), and if they are, does this reflect the operation of a literary universal (or some other factor)? The same kind of question might be asked about any imposed form. For example, pattern poems (Higgins) involve the imposition of an external form - the shape of an image - which can influence the composition of the written poem (such as the length of lines); but are some patterns more common than others, and if so, is this because psychological or functional factors are playing a role, and might these be part of literary universals?

A key consideration is whether the form is used more than once, or by more than one author, and whether it constitutes a 'tradition'. Consider for example the case of Gerard Manley Hopkins's invented meter called 'sprung rhythm', which adapts an older folk tradition of 'loose iambic' meter but extends the number of unstressed syllables allowed between a fixed number of stressed syllables. This meter has occasionally been imitated; for example Dylan Thomas's poem 'In country sleep' is in sprung rhythm (and includes other explicit echoes of Hopkins). Why was Hopkins's meter not used more widely? There might be literary-historical reasons; perhaps the posthumous publication of his poems came at a time when his innovations already seemed out of fashion. In other words, sprung rhythm may conform to literary universals but failed to be adopted for other reasons. It it also may be that sprung rhythm is not well suited to literary (here metrical) universals. Promoting this argument, Fabb and Halle argue that Hopkins draws on two previously separated ways of adding syllables to the line: the additional syllables of folk verse and the uncounted syllables (synaloepha etc.) of iambic pentameter. This ambiguity of origin for extra syllables makes it difficult to establish the underlying metrical form of

sprung rhythm poems, which in turn might militate against its survival as a metrical tradition. Hopkins's sprung rhythm shows that it is not straightforward to use take-up into a tradition as a way of judging whether a literary innovation conforms to literary universals.

It is worth comparing innovations in literature with invented languages. Like literary innovations, languages are invented by specific people at specific times; in a few cases, those languages are learned by children as native speakers; they include Esperanto and some sign languages. Invented languages need not conform to any linguistic universals, but it is a general assumption (with supporting evidence) that when these languages are learned, they are changed such that they come to conform to universals. These are like the changes that a pidgin undergoes on its route to becoming a creole. Here we see the loose analogy with literary invention, when a particular invention becomes a tradition, such that not only the original author uses it, but it is used by other authors (and is read by readers). But, as we have seen, this criterion is difficult to use consistently; innovations can be unadopted for a variety of reasons, and artificial systems might furthermore be used for a long time. As an underlying problem, there is no equivalent of the 'native speaker' when it comes to literature; in principle one could learn an (adapted) invented language as one's only language, but there is no equivalent to this for literature.

We are left with the problem that we cannot be sure whether a characteristic of a literary text, particularly when it is fairly unique, should be expected to conform to literary universals. We know that innovations can in principle be arbitrary relative to literary universals, but there are no watertight tests for establishing whether any particular characteristic should be counted as arbitrary.

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